

Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the USA

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For a very long time, writers have sneered at the suburbs. They have looked down on suburbanites for being materialistic, unimaginative, and boring. They have complained about the social and physical monotony of the suburban scene while deploring its individualism and lack of community. Left-wing critics – which is to say the majority – have described the suburbs as places of ersatz satisfactions, where capitalism twists our yearnings for a better life into double garages and barbecues. To this familiar litany many have recently added the charge that suburban living is irresponsible, the ultimate manifestation of our society's commitment to unsustainable growth. One alternative that is currently in favour is the New Urbanism, which promises to recreate the city in the suburbs. There is also a more pessimistic vision. Best expressed in Mike Davis' dystopian view of Los Angeles, first in *City of Quartz. Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London and New York: Verso, 1990) and more recently in *Ecology of Fear. Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Holt, 1998), it reckons that we are all going to hell in a hand-basket.

Although the storm of criticism has gathered in fury, the tide may yet be turning. A growing number of writers have begun to defend the suburbs. In the United States the tone, and to some extent the fashion, was set more than a decade ago by Joel Garreau in *Edge City. Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, 1991). His recognition of 'Edge Cities' suggests a new take on what is happening at the metropolitan fringe: instead of formless sprawl he discerns new nodes of economic activity, community, and (yes) culture. Instead of uniformity he sees diversity; in place of isolation and anomie he describes vibrant communities of interest; instead of conformity he finds limitless self-expression. Lately, American academics have elaborated upon these themes, and in particular that of diversity. It has become conventional to note that

modern suburbs contain all kinds of people, rich and (fairly) poor, immigrant and native-born, white and other shades. Historians such as Andrew Wiese and Becky Nicolaides are now reporting that the same was also true in the past. They are also re-examining their anti-suburban prejudices, as Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen do in their confessional introduction to *Picture Windows. How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). The same re-assessment is underway in Britain, although perhaps less vigorously. Here, for example, the geographers Jeremy Whitehand and Catherine Carr have pointed out in *Twentieth-Century Suburbs. A Morphological Approach* (London: Routledge, 2001) that even the inter-war suburban semis came a range of sizes and styles. Academics and writers of socially-grounded fiction, such as Zadie Smith in *White Teeth* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000), have shown that the people who now occupy those semis come in all shades. This social and physical diversity is at least comparable with that of the nineteenth-century terraces that intellectuals have been gentrifying for a generation or more. Stereotypes are being questioned and, perhaps for the first time, there is a real debate about the merits of the suburbs.

In *Suburban Century*, Mark Clapson takes stock of the historiography, and the historical experience, of suburban development over the past century. It is very much a work of synthesis, drawing in only a few cases upon the author's research. Focusing on the social aspects of the subject, he claims to present the evidence that will enable readers to draw their own conclusions. (p. 7) He does this, but it is clear where his own sympathies lie. They are implied early on, in his suggestion that the emergence of a more favourable view of suburbs is a sign that their historiography is finally 'maturing'. (p. 9) His own perspective is finally unveiled, however, when he declares that his purpose is 'to rescue suburbia from the enormous condensation of the rich, young, and trendy'. (p. 13) He is not an uncritical booster, but it is clear where he stands.

Depending on how broadly or narrowly they are defined, suburbs may be said to date back a couple of centuries or several millennia. Clapson concentrates on the past century, which is when suburban living became the norm in what is still usually described as the developed world. He covers some of the inevitable topics and in an effective fashion. Early chapters survey the range of 'expert' opinion and outline what many believe to have been the major forces that have shaped the growth and evolution of suburbs, in particular the rise of mass transit and the automobile. He discusses the aspirations that led or drove people into the suburbs, including a pervasive anti-urbanism, the desire to own one's own home, and to live in spacious, attractive districts that are close to, or incorporate some elements of, the country. He takes on the argument, most fully developed by feminists since the 1960s, that suburban environments best suit men, largely because women have found the transportation options to be limiting. Assessing the evidence he concludes that this may sometimes have been true but that it has usually been overstated. He also takes on those who have criticised the suburbs for their alienated individualism and social conformity. Again, he argues, both points have been overstated. Suburbanites are often joiners, especially in the early years of settlement when friends have to be made and social institutions built up, but this is their choice. These are reasonable conclusions, well expressed.

Slightly less conventional is Clapson's treatment of the class and ethnic dimensions of the suburban trend. Acknowledging recent arguments that modern suburbs are socially diverse, he plays up their ethnic mix. He devotes a chapter to the suburbanisation of Blacks, and another to Jews and Asian immigrants. This is a useful corrective to the stereotype that English and American suburbs are still largely white. Interestingly, his conclusion is that in moving to the urban fringe, minorities have been motivated by almost exactly the same considerations as the white majority, which suggests that ethnic suburbs are less distinctive than they may at first appear. If true, I am not sure whether this conclusion is comforting or dispiriting. But suburbs have often been stereotyped not only as white, but also as middle class. Clapson notes that this stereotype has not been accurate, but he does not deal with the issue head on, for example by discussing the mechanisms that made it possible for workers to settle at the urban fringe. In Britain, the construction of council estates after World War I was obviously vital in this regard; in the United States, speculative builders catered to workers in industrial suburbs, while in the extensive fringe areas that lacked municipal government, many workers simply built their own homes. These corporation, industrial, and unplanned suburbs have differed significantly from the middle-class subdivisions of conventional mythology, and these

points of class difference deserve more sustained attention in a survey such as this.

The most unconventional aspects of *Suburban Century*, and its main interest, is its comparative frame of reference and the manner in which it seamlessly connects past and present. Trained as a historian, Clapson is nevertheless comfortable with the sociological literature and with the construction of a narrative that gives a fairly balanced coverage of the entire twentieth century. He speaks, then, to historians and social scientists alike. Even more unusually, he undertakes to compare the English experience with that of the United States, with occasional references to Scotland, Canada and Australia thrown in for good measure. Most histories of cities and suburbs focus on just one place; a few have tried to interpret a national experience, but almost none compare countries. In particular, and to a remarkable degree, histories of suburbanisation in Britain and the United States rarely make more than passing transatlantic references. This is obviously unfortunate. As Robert Fishman has argued in *Bourgeois Utopias: the Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), a rare comparative study, the design of the early middle-class English suburbs had enormous influence in the United States. More importantly, as Clapson claims, many of the same motives have driven the suburban trend in both countries. There are, of course, national differences. The most obvious of these are residential densities and, because of different planning environments, varying degrees of sprawl. On this point Clapson extends Arthur Edwards' vivid simile, suggesting that if English cities have grown incrementally and amorphously, like lichen, those in the United States are lichen on growth hormones. He notes other differences too, most obviously the contrasting history of race relations, and the differing proportions of immigrants, especially in the first half of the twentieth century.

One of the challenges of a comparative study, particularly on a topic that has attracted a lot of attention, is being able to keep up with the pertinent literature and do justice to the major debates. Clapson is widely-read: the list of references runs to about 560 items. The author of *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns. Social Change and Urban Dispersal in Post-war England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), he speaks with authority of the modern British experience but misses, or downplays, some important elements of the American scene. He suggests, for example, that Jews were central to the emergence of ethnic diversity in American suburbs. This is arguable for New York, and perhaps one or two other places, but it is not generally true. In many eastern cities, and throughout the midwest, suburban industries led other immigrants into the suburbs. In the Chicago area, for example, it drew Germans to Hammond, Poles to West Hammond, and Italians to Chicago Heights. With regard to the suburbanisation of African-Americans, Clapson barely acknowledges the argument that has been articulated most forcefully by William Julius Wilson, notably in *The Truly Disadvantaged: the Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Wilson concedes that in the United States suburbanisation has reflected the opening up of opportunities for a new black middle class, but argues that it has left behind a ghettoised underclass, whose opportunities for social and geographical advancement have been reduced almost to the vanishing point. With respect to the American working class, Clapson accepts the established view that workers followed the middle class into the suburbs and, in so doing, were essentially imitating their social superiors. This downplays the very long history of working-class settlement at the fringe of US cities, and overlooks the fact that, as a number of writers have shown, including Olivier Zunz in *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), in moving to the suburbs workers were driven by motives that were different from those of the middle class. Workers were, above all, determined to gain control over some aspect of their lives by emancipating themselves from the arbitrary tyrannies of the landlord.⁽¹⁾

Finally, Clapson underestimates the importance of the local political realm. To be sure, he acknowledges that in the United States suburban municipalities have often exercised their powers to exclude those whom they view as socially undesirable. He also discusses, at some length, the implications of suburbanisation for national party politics. But purely local politics has a different, and a greater, kind of significance in the United States than in Britain. American municipalities have constitutional powers; they cannot be abolished or amalgamated by state and federal governments against their will. The proliferation of local governments continues to shape the suburbanisation process; indeed Americans commonly define suburbs, in part, as

places with a political identity. Each of these features of the American experience sets it apart from the British, and in neglecting them Clapson reveals the geographical bias of his knowledge and experience. As a result, I also believe that he overstates the commonalities in the historical experience of these countries.

It would be a pity if certain gaps in coverage were to discourage potential readers in the United States. In a recent review article, Mark Swenarton has noted that the literature on American suburbs is extensive, lively, and in many ways diverse.⁽²⁾ That is true, but it is also consistently parochial. It is the great merit of *Suburban Century* that it tries to open up some channels of dialogue between historians of US and British suburbs. This, as much as any specific claims that it makes, may be its lasting contribution.

Notes

1. Richard Harris, 'The suburban worker in the history of labor,' *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 64 (2003), 8-24.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Mark Swenarton, 'Tudor Walters and Tudorbethan. Reassessing Britain's inter-war suburbs', *Planning Perspectives*, 17 (2002), 267-86.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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